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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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WAS FATAH BEHIND THE SEABORNE TERRORIST ATTEMPT AGAINST ISRAEL?

Summary

Fatah most likely staged the abortive seaborne terrorist operation against Israel last weekend. We do not believe, however, that the attempted attack presages a shift by Arafat away from the diplomatic track in the peace process and a return to militant armed struggle. Arafat probably regarded the operation as a tactical move to placate Fatah hardliners.

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Evidence of Fatah Responsibility

Available information suggests strongly that Fatah was indeed responsible:

- Three of the captured terrorists, interviewed on Israeli television, claimed that Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), Fatah's number two man, visited the terrorist ship after it left Algeria to explain in detail the tactics and objectives of the operation.
- Al-Wazir is known to have been in Algeria twice just prior to the time of the operation.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Israel/Jordan/Palestinian Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It was requested by LtC. Fred Hof of International Security Affairs. Information as of 26 April was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, [redacted]

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- PLO headquarters in Tunis issued a comminuque in al-Wazir's name claiming credit for the assault and giving details of the operation similar to those provided by the terrorists interviewed on Israeli television. Only Fatah has claimed responsibility--although in the past more than one group has often claimed credit for such incidents.

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- Finally, Fatah has trained in naval operations and has some naval equipment at its disposal.

The timing of the operation also suggests Fatah involvement. Fatah ranks are currently split between those who endorse Arafat's diplomatic moves and those who believe he has gone too far. A Fatah-planned terrorist operation would help Arafat convince his opponents that he has not given up the military option. PLO radio commentaries since the failed attempt have stressed the need to maintain the equilibrium between diplomacy and armed struggle. If this analysis is correct, it suggests the raid was a tactical move by Fatah rather than any fundamental change in course.

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Could Some Other Group Have Been Responsible?

We have no evidence that any other group was involved. Nevertheless, there are reasons why pro-Syrian Palestinian groups that disagree with Arafat's diplomatic maneuvering would want to conduct such an operation now.

- Such an operation would severely limit the chance for diplomatic progress in the peace process. Prime Minister Peres has already seized on the incident as another justification not to deal with Arafat.
- It would embarrass Arafat at a time when he has invested a lot of Fatah capital to convince the United States that he is a moderate who deserves to be included in peace negotiations.
- Syria is concerned about Algeria's turn toward the West. Launching an operation from Algeria on the heels of President Bendjedid's visit to Washington would complicate efforts at improved relations.

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On balance, we believe the weight of the evidence points toward Fatah as the instigator of the attack.

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SUBJECT: Was Arafat Behind the Seaborne Terrorist Attempt
Against Israel?

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